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ABSTRACT

Alternative organizaticns such as food co-ops and free schools are committed to working in an egalitarian, participatory-democratic fashion. Like bureaucratic organizations, however, they encounter various problems of power. The author analyzes these problems, based mainly on his experience as director of a free school. Among the dilemmas discussed are 1) delegation of authority vs. decision-making by the entire collective, 2) consensus vs. majority voting, and 3) control by the workers vs. control by customers, clients, or the community. (Author)

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POWER IN ALTERNATIVE ORGANIZATIONS:

The Case of a Free School*

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POWER IN ALTERNATIVE ORGANIZATIONS:

The Case of a Free School

Frank Lindenfeld

Abstract

Alternative organizations such as food co-ops, free schools etc. are committed to working in an egalitarian, participatory-democratic fashion. Like bureaucratic organizations, however, they encounter various problems of power. These problems are analyzed with special reference to a free school directed by the author. Among the dilemmas discussed are delegation of authority vs. decision making by the entire collective; consensus vs. majority voting; and control by the workers vs. control by customers, clients or community.

Introduction

All social groups must deal with the problem of power; so-called alternative organizations are no exception (Kinkade, 1974). Such organizations, including food co-ops, free clinics, etc. are generally committed to working in an egalitarian, non-bureaucratic, participatory democratic manner. Nevertheless they face various dilemmas of power such as: delegation of authority vs. decision making by the entire collective; consensus vs. majority voting; workers' control vs. community and client control. In this paper, I discuss these dilemmas within alternative organizations, using my experience with a free school as an example.

The school discussed here was one of hundreds of free schools that began in California in the late 1960's and early 70's. It had between 20-50 students and 4-10 staff members. There was a Director for all except the second year, and also a governing board elected by parents and teachers. My information was gathered through participant observation. Because I was so intimately involved with the organization, I cannot make any claim for being an impartial observer. As a founder, parent and for several years its Director, I was passionately committed to making it work.

The main goals of the school were to provide a non-alienating alternative to public school where students could learn and develop at their own pace, and where students and teachers could determine school policies that affected them. These goals were widely shared by students, parents and teachers. (The school's commitment to an anti-authoritarian, participatory-democratic ethos was made clear in its literature; for the most part it attracted members in general sympathy with the ideas expressed in Summerhill (Neill, 1960).)

Three Dilemmas of Power

1. One problem for alternative organizations is the delegation of authority.

Although the membership as a whole is usually the ultimate authority, in practice the group may not be able to meet together as frequently as necessary to decide day-to-day issues. Even when it does meet, implementation of a decision must often be delegated to one person or a committee. Further, unless the organization is extremely small, various matters may have to be delegated to officers or committees for action between meetings. Inevitably, some decisions of the delegates may run counter to the wishes of the membership.

2. A second issue is balancing the rights of the majority vs. those of the minority. Alternative organizations often try to reach decisions by consensus, taking into account the objections of any minorities (sometimes one or two dissenting individuals) and not acting until there is full agreement. Does this give too much power to a few who disagree with the majority? In the interest of organizational efficiency, should some kinds of decisions be by majority vote?

3. Alternative organizations are usually formed to provide more democratic forms of decision making. But this is no easy task. The school, for example, encountered the problem of how to balance the sometimes conflicting needs and interests of teachers, students and parents. This is the dilemma of workers' (teachers) control vs. client and community (students' and parents') control.

Who decides?

The organizational structure of the school was formally similar to that of public schools. There was a governing board, elected by the school members (parents and teachers) and a Director. Day-to-day plans were decided in school meetings of students and staff.

The school's ideal was to make major decisions in weekly school meetings, where each student and teacher had one vote. This ideal was often violated for several reasons. First, some decisions had to be made on the spot by staff members between meetings. Second, many issues were too trivial to take up the time of the

entire group. Third, even when decisions were arrived at in school meetings, practical implementation was usually left in the hands of a staff member. The way a teacher interpreted a decision affected how it was done, and even whether it would ever be carried out. But most importantly, the adults involved did not want to give up their power on issues of money or personnel. The staff, including the teachers and the Director, often felt they had more at stake than either students or parents, because their livelihood depended on the school.

Further, the school attracted many teachers, older students and even parents who held strong anti-authoritarian attitudes and values and who were ambivalent about the exercise of authority, even by officers of delegates elected by and responsible to themselves. This was partly a product of the "do your own thing" philosophy that many school members believed in. The members' ambivalence about power and authority and distrust of managers was reflected both in a lack of clear delegation of powers and in constant criticisms of the Director. Students and teachers did not want to be bothered with taking care of minor administrative problems; the students especially resented too much time spent in meetings. Nevertheless, teachers and students often griped about any decisions that were made without them. As Hawley (1974) has pointed out, managers in non-bureaucratic organizations are subject to far more criticism by members than those in bureaucracies. Managers in non-bureaucratic organizations are criticized for their actions and criticized when they do <u>not</u> take action.

The school suffered two major crises, power struggles severe enough to lead to a split in the school, and the secession of an entire faction each time. The first arose only a few months after the school began. One of the five staff members was accused of violating the school rule against bringing marijuana to the campus, and dismissed by the Director for this alleged infraction. The teachers opposed the

dismissal, though they did not strike. They took their case to the Board of Directors. A majority of the Board sided with them, and relieved the Director of his administrative duties. As he was the school's landlord, however, he evicted the school corporation though he did work with the remaining teachers and a conservative faction of the parents who organized an interim administration. The school moved to a new site the following year, minus the Director and half the students, but with all of the teachers.

The Board eliminated the position of Director and the school was then administered by the collectivity of the teachers. The seven full and part time staff met once or twice a week. (The "Cost" to the teachers was less free time, since the meetings were long, and there was no additional pay. The meetings were also attended by two or three Board members, including myself, but the governing board did not meet separately during that time.) The period of staff control of the school was successful in almost every respect. Nevertheless, there was a vehement conflict over pay which split the school once again.

The staff precipated the crises by voting themselves a one-third salary increase, funds for which were to come from tuition paid in advance. The level of expense threatened to bankrupt the school well before the end of the year. The new salaries, $500 per month for full time and $300 per month for three days a week, were not high in comparison with industry or public schools. They were higher than typical "movement" pay, however. As Rothschild-Whitt (1976) has pointed out, low pay scales in alternative organizations keep them democratic because there are no high salary jobs for anyone to have a vested interest in.

After the salary increase, some of the parents decided to reactivate the governing board. At a special joint meeting of the Board and staff members convened to deal with the issue, the divisions between "management" and "labor" became very apparent. Some parents suggested reducing salaries to meet income,

tying the number of paid teachers and their level of remuneration to school income. The teachers rejected this in favor of a fixed number of positions at fixed salaries. They proposed a continuation of deficit spending but were not willing to assume responsibility for finding additional funds. The Board dismissed two teachers in an economy move and appointed me Business Manager. This was done over the strong protest of the staff, who were dismayed that the Board reclaimed its delegated powers. Feeling betrayed, most of the teachers resigned and took a majority of the students with them.*

* Several teachers subsequently sued the school for wages they would have received under the salary scale they had voted for themselves.

Consensus vs. Majority Rule

Like many other alternative organizations, the free school experimented with consensus decision making in place of majority voting. An advantage of consensus is that organizations proceed only along lines acceptable to all of the members, who become committed to decisions by taking part in formulating them. Moreover, the majority is not always right and the consensus process insures that minority voices of conscience are listened to. A disadvantage is that such decision making may be slow and tedious and that the objections of one person or a tiny minority can keep the entire organization from necessary action. The larger the number of persons in a group meeting, the more difficult consensus voting becomes, because even one "no", in effect, may constitute a veto.

At the all-school and staff meetings, we strove for consensus when possible, though this sometimes meant lengthy arguments and discussions. There was never any clear demarcation between decisions to be arrived at by consensus and those that could be made by majority vote. This distinction only grew out of our practice. Because there was general agreement among teachers, students and parents on such basic values as non-coercive education, the consensus process did not usually prove too cumbersome, at least on minor matters.

The most single difficult issue was hiring and firing staff. Usually a teacher worked for a probationary period, after which she/he would be evaluated by the staff and retained, or fired. At first we used majority voting for making this decision. In a couple of instances, however, strong reservations were expressed by a minority of the staff about keeping a probationary teacher -- several teachers insisted they did not want to work with the new person. This led us gradually to the position that there had to be unanimity on "retention" decisions; a new person was not kept on unless all the teachers agreed. If there was even one strong objection, we did not retain the probationary staff member.

The way the consensus process worked on less important issues was that minority opinions were voiced, but individuals would not stand in the way of majority action. On two occasions (discussed above) when substantial minorities felt there was a very important issue at stake, and would not back down, the school split into separate organizations. These splits would have occurred no matter what the school's voting procedures.

Workers' control vs. client control

A major issue at our school was how much say the teachers would have, and over what. The two splits in the school were basically reflections of struggles for control between staff and parents. The ultimate authority was vested in the Board of Directors, initially dominated by one faction of parents. During the second year, the Board turned over its authority to the staff, so that the teachers were running the organization in every respect. The Board retained its powers, perhaps a serious deficiency in that the teachers' control may not have seemed "real" enough for them to accept full responsibility for the consequences of their decision to raise their own pay.

The issue of workers' vs. member control also arises in food co-ops, which, like the free schools, may be considered "alternative" institutions. Some co-ops are dominated by the membership, which elects a Board of Directors that sets policy, hires managers, etc. Other co-ops are run by their workers as worker-managed organizations, with only minimal input from customers or members. Even in co-ops controlled by the membership, the active participation and interest of most members (even including Board members) is not as strong as that of the managers and workers, for whom the co-op is a source of livelihood. Thus there is a tendency for the workers, and especially the store managers, to give precedence to their own interests when there is a conflict between lower prices vs. higher pay.

For example, the self managed food co-ops in Washington, D.C. federated into "Strong force," have been criticized for being too insulated from community influence.

The main decisions about the stores are made by the several persons that work there; those who shop there don't have much more say than they do in the operation of any chain supermarket. As Zwerdling (1975) points out:

> The stores are still operated and controlled by small private groups. Stone Soup and Fields have their suggestion sheets where shoppers can write comments about the store, and the collectives have open meeting where outsiders can participate. But in the end, when decisions are actually made, do these necessarily give shoppers much more power than Safeway's suggestion box?

In 1976, the workers in one of the stores concluded that co-ops were a dead end and decided unilaterally to sell out to a private business. This decision was narrowly averted by other members of Strong force.

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Alternative organizations need a structure that allows for both workers' and community/membership influence on organizational policies. This can take one of several forms:

(1) Worker-controlled organizations (where these who work in the organization are the ultimate authority, one person, one vote, or where they elect 51% of the governing board).

(2) Member controlled organizations, (where consumer-members are the ultimate authority, one person, one vote, or where they elect 51% of the governing board)

(3) Pluralistically controlled organizations: where both workers and consumers elect half of the governing board; or where there is recognition of the interests of three or more parties, no one of which has a majority on the governing board. When organizations are small enough, as in many co-ops and free schools, it may be preferable for all the full time staff to be on the governing board and in fact to constitute half its members. This may help insure against a division of the organization into workers vs. management.

The "pluralist" approach was the one the free school eventually adopted (see below). An illustration of this approach is the Washington, D.C. based insurance

firm, International Group Plans, (IGP) with over 300 workers. At present, half the Board of Directors is elected by the workers. IGP President and founder Jim Gibbons is working on a plan whereby the other half of the Board would be elected by the non-profit organizations that buy insurance from the company. In this way, the interests of workers and clients would be more evenly balanced. A similar approach could be adopted by food co-ops. Another example of the pluralist approach would be worker-managed enterprises where two fifths of the Board of Directors are chosen by the workers, one fifth by the central government, one fifth by the local community, and one fifth by non-worker stockholders.

At the free school, the composition of the governing board was changed several times in the direction of more balanced representation. The first Board was self-selected; it consisted of parents and community members co-opted to it, with an ex-officio membership of the Director. Next, the Board was elected by the parents, with one representative of the staff. Still later, the organization shifted to a more equal representation of staff, students and parents, so that no one of the three "interest groups" had a majority on the Board.

Some of the early difficulties at the school might have been avoided if there had been either no Board, or one more representative of parents, students and staff. Actually, a high school offshoot of the original school had no governing board, but conflicts between staff members and staff and students continued. (The parents were far away). Indeed, it would be hopelessly utopian to imagine that we could construct an organization that engaged in vital activities yet was devoid of conflict.

The question of how best to balance interests of workers, clients and community has no clear answers. Formulas for alternative organizations that place power in the hands of a management board with only minority representation of its workers may effectively safeguard the interests of clients and the community

at large, but at the expense of continuing the split between labor and management. Those that place power in the hands of the workers must deal with the problem that worker-controlled firms, like those managed by or for capitalists, may sometimes further their own interests at the expense of clients or consumers.

Although issues of structure are important, democratic functioning of alternative organizations depends also on the existence of a cooperative attitude among the members. Conflicts of interest between workers and clients, managers and members, are inevitable, and alternative organizations cannot necessarily eliminate them. It helps, however, to have workers and members who understand that such conflict is normal and are prepared to deal with each other on the basis of mutual concern and respect.

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